Xi assures Lula of China's support in 'turbulent' times

BEIJING: Chinese leader Xi Jinping assured his Brazilian counterpart on Friday that China would stand by Latin America's biggest economy and the Global South, and called for both nations to maintain the role of the United Nations, state news agency Xinhua said.

Xi's comments in a telephone call with President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva followed the latter's criticism of the US attack on Venezuela in an opinion piece in the *New York Times* this week.

Xi said China and Brazil should safeguard the shared interests of the Global South and jointly maintain the role of the United Nations in the "current turbulent international situation", the agency said.

Lula's office confirmed the 45-minute call, saying that both leaders "reiterated their commitment to strengthening the United Nations as a path to safeguarding peace and stability in the world".

US move stokes worries

The US seized Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro three weeks ago to be prosecuted on narcotics charges. Since then, President Trump has proposed a Board of Peace that some fear may be intended to rival the UN.

The US action in Venezuela stoked worries among Latin American countries about the risk of similar interventions by force on their turf, and prompted criticism from the United Nations.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the *BBC* that the US was putting the founding principles of the United Nations, including the equality of member states, at risk.

In his Jan 18 piece, Lula wrote that the future of Venezuela and any other country must remain in the hands of its people.

"In more than 200 years of independent history, this is the first time that South America has come under direct military attack by the United States, though American forces previously intervened in the region," he said.

"It is crucial that the leaders of major powers understand that a world of permanent hostility is not viable. However strong those powers may be, they cannot rely simply on fear and coercion."

Trump's threat to use force to acquire Greenland, an autonomous Danish territory, has also opened a rift with security allies across the Atlantic.

US bombings and the capture of Maduro challenge China's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean, where Xi has promised new credit lines and infrastructure investment.—Reuters

Fury grows over five-year-old's detention in US

MINNEAPOLIS: Outrage grew this week at the detention of a five-year-old boy in a massive immigration crackdown in Minneapolis, as US Vice President J. D. Vance defended federal agents' actions.

Thousands of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have been deployed to the Democratic-led city, as the administration of President Trump presses its campaign to deport what it says are millions of illegal immigrants across the country.

Vance confirmed on Thursday that the five-year-old boy, Liam Conejo Ramos, was among those detained, but argued that agents were protecting him after his father "ran" from an immigration sweep.

"What are they supposed to do? Are they supposed to let a five-year-old child freeze to death?" he said.

In Geneva, the UN rights chief Volker Turk called on US authorities to end the "dehumanising portrayal and harmful treatment of migrants and refugees".

"I am astounded by the now-routine abuse and denigration of migrants and refugees," he said in a statement. "Where is the concern for their dignity, and our common humanity?"

Democratic Texas congressman Joaquin Castro rejected Vance's explanation for the child's arrest, branding Homeland Security authorities "sick liars".

Castro said that he had not been able to locate the boy, who was reportedly being held with his father in San Antonio, Texas.

"My staff and I have been working to figure out his whereabouts, make sure that he's safe and also to demand his release by ICE," he said in a video posted on *X*.

But ICE "have not given us information", he said.

Calls for a day of action against ICE have been circulating on social media, with a demonstration expected in downtown Minneapolis this week.

And some activists have called for an "economic blackout", urging residents not to work, shop or go to school in protest.

Just a baby

Former vice president Kamala Harris said she was "outraged" by Ramos's detention.

"Liam Ramos is just a baby. He should be at home with his family, not used as bait by ICE and held in a Texas detention centre," she wrote on *X*.

Harris shared a photo of the child wearing a blue knitted hat with dangling, white rabbit ears, while a person behind him appears to hold onto his backpack.

Another photo circulating online shows Ramos escorted by a man wearing black clothes and a black face covering.

Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton accused law enforcement of "terrorising a population" and "using children as pawns".

Minneapolis mayor Jacob Frey said the federal government was treating children "like criminals". Frey said the influx of 3,000 federal agents felt like an "occupation".

The Homeland Security department rejected claims that ICE agents targeted the child, saying he had been "abandoned" by his father during an operation to arrest the man.—AFP

KHARTOUM: Women walk outside a hospital after it resumed services in the Sudanese capital this week. At the Bahri Teaching Hospital, medical personnel are beaming because nearly three years after it was wrecked and looted in the early days of Sudan's civil war, the facility has welcomed its first patients. The hospital was stormed in April 2023, soon after fighting broke out between a paramilitary force and Sudan's army.—AFP

Trump revokes Canada's Board of Peace invite

In his speech at Davos, Carney had condemned use of economic integration as a weapon

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump withdrew on Thursday an invitation for Canada to join his Board of Peace initiative aimed at resolving global conflicts. Trump's about-face follows Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where he openly decried powerful nations using economic integration as weapons and tariffs as leverage.

"Please let this Letter serve to represent that the Board of Peace is withdrawing its invitation to you regarding Canada's joining, what will be, the most prestigious Board of Leaders ever assembled, at any time," Trump wrote in a Truth Social post directed at Carney.

Neither Carney's office nor the White House immediately responded to *Reuters* requests for comment on Thursday evening.

Last week, Carney's office said he had been invited to serve on the board and planned to accept.

Carney received a rare standing ovation in Davos after the speech, in which he urged nations to accept the end of a rules-based global order.

Canada, which recently signed a trade deal with China, can show how "middle powers" might act together to avoid being victimised by American hegemony, he added.

Trump retorted that Canada "lives because of the United States," and told listeners in Davos that Carney should be grateful for the United States previous largesse.

"Remember that, Mark, the next time you make your statements," he added, addressing Carney directly. The withdrawal of Canada's invitation came hours after Trump officially launched the board, which was initially meant to cement a Gaza ceasefire.

Permanent members must help fund the board with a payment of $1 billion each, according to Trump.

"Once this board is completely formed, we can do pretty much whatever we want to do," Trump said in Switzerland on Thursday. "And we'll do it in conjunction with the United Nations.

The board's establishment was endorsed by a United Nations Security Council resolution as part of Trump's Gaza peace plan, and UN spokesperson Rolando Gomez said on Thursday that UN engagement with the board would only be in that context.

Member nations include Argentina, Bahrain, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey. Other US allies, such as Britain, France and Italy, have indicated they will not join for now.—Reuters

Greenland galvanises Europe to confront new reality

DAVOS: Europe may have rallied to see off President Donald Trump over Greenland, but its leaders recognise the confrontation is unlikely to be the last in dealings with his increasingly strident version of the United States.

The stakes could hardly be higher, given the $2 trillion trading relationship between the European Union and the US and the dominant role Washington continues to play in the Nato alliance and in support of Ukraine against Russia.

This week, in the space of a few hours at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Trump first ruled out taking Greenland by force and then removed the threat of new tariffs on eight European states standing in his way - hailing instead a vague deal for the Arctic island with Nato chief Mark Rutte.

European leaders believe Trump backed down in part because - in contrast to their more accommodating stance in last year's tariff negotiations — this time they made it clear he was crossing a red line by asserting that Greenland's status as an autonomous territory of Denmark was non-negotiable.

"All this shows that you cannot let the Americans trample all over the Europeans," said a European Union official.

"We did the right thing to push back, to be firm in what we said, but it is not over. My sense is that we will be tested constantly on issues like this," the official said.

While Europe may have learned the value of standing up to Trump, the challenge is ensuring it is less exposed next time.

"It's a hard route, and it's going to take time," said Rosa Balfour, director at Carnegie Europe, adding that Europe had "far more leverage than it has dared to use".—Reuters

US points its armada

Continued from Page 1

and regrettable fate". He said the force had its "finger on the trigger" and was ready to carry out orders from the supreme leader.

General Ali Abdollahi Aliabadi, head of Iran's joint command headquarters, warned that if America attacked, "all US interests, bases and centres of influence" would be considered "legitimate targets".

Beyond the geopolitical standoff, Iran is grappling with the aftermath of a fortnight of nationwide protests that shook the clerical leadership starting in late in December.

The UN Human Rights Council is scheduled to hold an emergency session Friday to discuss the "alarming violence" used against protesters, while a group of states will call on United Nations' investigators to document alleged abuses for future trials. Rights groups say thousands, including bystanders, were killed during the unrest.

While Trump had previously pulled back a threat to strike Iran, citing reports that Tehran had halted the planned executions of 800 demonstrators, Iran's top prosecutor, Mohammad Movahedi, denied that Iran had called off such executions.

"This claim is completely false. No such number exists, nor has the judiciary made any such decision," Movahedi was quoted as saying by the judiciary's news agency Mizan.

However, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi told *Fox News* last week there was "no plan for hanging at all".

Giving their first official death toll on Wednesday, Iranian authorities said 3,117 people were killed during the unrest. The statement from Iran's foundation for martyrs distinguished between "martyrs"— members of security forces or innocent bystanders — and what it called US-backed "rioters".

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian accused the US and Israel of stoking the protests as "cowardly revenge" for the recent war.

He stated that while protest is a natural right, a distinction must be drawn regarding protesters whose "hands are stained with the blood of innocent people."

Rights groups argue the heavy toll stems from security forces firing directly on demonstrators and say the actual number of dead could be far higher, potentially exceeding 20,000.

Efforts to confirm the scale have been hampered by an internet shutdown that monitor NetBlocks said had surpassed "two full weeks".

Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, director of the Iran Human Rights NGO, said the official toll has "no credibility whatsoever." IHR says it has verified at least 3,428 deaths, while the US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency has documented 4,902 deaths and at least 26,541 arrests.—AFP

Emergencies in Washington and New York ahead of winter storm

By Our Correspondent

WASHINGTON: Authorities across the United States have declared multiple emergencies as a powerful winter storm is expected to sweep through large parts of the country this weekend, bringing heavy snowfall, freezing rain and dangerously low temperatures.

In the US capital, mayor Muriel Bowser has declared a state of emergency with immediate effect, warning residents to prepare for severe weather conditions.

A snow emergency will also come into force at noon on Saturday and remain in effect until Tuesday morning.

During this period, parking on designated snow emergency routes will be prohibited to allow snowploughs to operate. Vehicles left on these routes may be ticketed and towed.

Similar declarations and weather alerts have been issued in Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York.

In New York, Governor Kathy Hochul warned that a major winter storm is expected to hit the state on Saturday, affecting New York City and surrounding areas. Weather forecasters say heavy and widespread snowfall is likely, with some areas receiving close to a foot of snow. The storm could also bring sleet and freezing rain, followed by a sharp drop in temperatures.

According to the National Weather Service, snowfall is expected to begin late on Saturday afternoon and continue through early Monday, with the heaviest accumulation forecast overnight Saturday into Sunday.

Forecasters have also warned of freezing rain Sunday into Monday, increasing the risk of icy roads and power outages.

The storm will be followed by an extended period of extreme cold. Temperatures in Washington and much of the region are expected to remain below freezing well into next week, with overnight wind chills dropping below zero.

Authorities have warned that prolonged exposure to such conditions could lead to frostbite and hypothermia.

Israel threatens to close training centre in W. Bank

GENEVA: A training centre for hundreds of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank could be closed within days by Israeli authorities, jeopardising the education of students, the UN Palestinian refugee agency said on Friday.

The Kalandia Training Centre, which teaches 350 young male students from across the occupied West Bank skills such as plumbing and vehicle maintenance, could be shut, as the land it sits on is at risk of expropriation by Israeli authorities, UNRWA said.

"If the centre were to be forcibly closed - and we do fear that this could happen within days - there is no educational alternative for these students. So you're depriving a large cohort of Palestine Refugees of economic opportunities," Jonathan Fowler, UNRWA's spokesperson, told reporters in Geneva speaking via video link from Amman, Jordan.

"The right to education would be under attack there...The international community needs to wake up," he added.

A spokesperson for the Israeli government accused UNRWA of having links to the Hamas group, a charge the agency denies.

UNRWA has functioned for decades as the main international agency providing for the welfare of millions of Palestinian descendants of those who fled or were driven from homes during the war around Israel's founding.

Israel accuses UNRWA of bias, and Israel's parliament passed a law in October 2024 banning the agency from operating in the country and prohibiting officials from having contact with it.

Israel demolished structures inside the agency's East Jerusalem compound on Tuesday, a site it seized last year.

The agency's chief Philippe Lazzarini said the demolition was the latest in a series of Israeli actions against UNRWA, including a raid on a medical clinic this month and a plan to cut power and water to UNRWA facilities in the coming weeks.—Reuters

Gaza board membership becomes bone of contention

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took the decision [to conduct the tests] with courage," he said.

"Had the government decided not to join the Board of Peace, opposition members would have decried that Pakistan had not been given importance and had been isolated. They would have questioned why Pakistan was not part of such a major peace initiative."

Listing other Muslim countries that had joined the Board of Peace, the minister asked whether they were not Muslim and brother countries of Pakistan. "Have they joined to contribute to the bloodshed of Muslims?"

The minister said prominent Muslim countries had been given a chance through this initiative to play their role for the rights of the people of Palestine and for peace in the region.

He stressed that the government's stance was the same as that of the people of Pakistan — that "Israel is an aggressor and a cruel country", and that "Netanyahu has the blood of Muslims and Palestinians on his hands".

"Our moral stance has not changed at all," he said, adding that the government decided to join the board "so that we can play our role along with our brother countries for peace in Palestine".

Bills passed

During the sitting, three bills were passed — the Daanish Schools Authority Bill 2025, the Human Rights (Amendment) Bill 2025, and the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill 2025 — much to the chagrin of the opposition.

Opposition lawmakers staged a protest as members led by the leaders of the opposition in the National Assembly and the Senate, Mehmood Khan Achakzai and Raja Nasir respectively, gathered in front of the speaker's dais.

President Asif Ali Zardari, a top leader of the PPP, had returned these bills last month despite their passage by the Senate and the National Assembly.

The PPP, a major ally of the ruling PML-N, had opposed the Daanish Schools Authority Bill, arguing that education was a provincial subject and that the Centre was interfering in provincial matters by setting up Daanish schools across the country.

On the Daanish Schools Authority Bill, the JUI-F again registered its objections, with its Senator Kamran Murtaza saying President Zardari had returned the bill unsigned and termed it against the Constitution.

However, the JUI-F's objections were rejected by the joint sitting and the bill was passed in its original form.

The Human Rights (Amendment) Bill was presented by Federal Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Tariq Fazal Chaudhry, while it was passed by the joint sitting with the inclusion of an amendment moved by PPP MNA Shazia Marri.

The JUI-F also proposed some amendments to the bill, which were turned down by the joint sitting.

PPP MNA Sharmila Faruqui presented the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill, which was also passed by the session despite opposition from opposition benches.

According to the statement of objects and reasons of the bill, domestic violence remains a pervasive problem in Pakistan, with alarming statistics highlighting its widespread nature.

Minister of State for Interior Tallal Chaudhry said that not only women but men could also seek protection under the new law.

Opposing the bill, JUI-F chief Rehman said he believed such legislation was unconstitutional and illegal, adding that the bill should have been referred to the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII).

Resolution on Gul Plaza

During the joint sitting, lawmakers from both houses passed a resolution expressing solidarity with the victims of the Gul Plaza inferno in Karachi, calling on the Sindh government to introduce "systemic reforms" to ensure the tragedy was not repeated.

The fire that erupted at Gul Plaza last week left at least 67 people dead. The plaza, parts of which collapsed due to the blaze, was a ground-plus-three building with 1,200 shops spread over 8,000 square yards.

Through the resolution, parliament expressed solidarity with the families of the victims and took note of the "reported shortcomings that turned an accident into a mass tragedy", calling for systemic reforms.

"Parliament offers its heartfelt condolences and sympathies to the families of the deceased and prays for the swift recovery of the injured," the resolution said.

It also paid tribute to firefighter Furqan Ali, who lost his life while battling the deadly fire.

The resolution urged the Sindh government to ensure compensation for the families of victims and the immediate recovery of the affected businesses.